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BULGARIA

SUCCESS STORY

Eyes on Four Paws

Sofia-based NGO opens first school for guide dogs for the blind in Bulgaria



Photo: USAID

Martina Marinova, the only certified instructor of seeing-eye guide dogs for the blind in Bulgaria, with one of the Labradors undergoing training at the school. Intelligent and even-tempered, Labradors are well suited to guide visually impaired owners in an urban environment.

Albena Aleksieva, chairperson of “Eyes on Four Paws,” was inspired by the sense of personal freedom she found with her four-legged guide, a German shepherd named Kamila. She set up the NGO so that other blind people in Bulgaria could experience the same self-confidence.

“We started with nothing but an idea and a list of goals,” says Albena Alexieva, chairperson of the “Eyes on Four Paws” Foundation. The five Lab puppies sleeping peacefully in the room across the hall are tangible evidence of how that idea has become a reality.

In 2001, the words “seeing-eye dog” wouldn’t ring many bells for most Bulgarians. That’s when the Foundation was established with the aim of creating a Bulgarian school for guide dogs for blind people. As a result of strong teamwork, six years later the Foundation has achieved its major goals. The school was officially opened in Sofia in 2007 and two trained dogs were handed over to their new owners in Plovdiv and Harmanli for a symbolic one leva (about 75 cents).

The training cycle of a guide dog, from an initial period of socialization with a volunteer host family to the end of intensive training, lasts up to two years and costs 6,000-10,000 Bulgarian leva (\$4,000- \$6,700). In 2001, “Eyes on Four Paws” participated in the first grant competition for social enterprises sponsored by the USAID Community Fund and Social Enterprise (CFSE) Program. They received support for their plan to offer training courses for dog owners as a way to raise money for the school. Under the CFSE Program, the NGO had the opportunity to visit a school for seeing-eye dogs in Prague, Czech Republic, and acquire practical experience in organizing a social enterprise and interacting successfully with businesses.

“The organizational and theoretical knowledge we received through USAID was extremely valuable for the development of our activities,” remarks Mihail Nedkov, coordinator of the socialization program at “Eyes on Four Paws.” The NGO has since attracted business sponsors such as MTel, one of the largest mobile phone operators in Bulgaria.

In 2005, after winning first prize at the annual Business Plan Competition for Social Entrepreneurs in Bulgaria, “Eyes on Four Paws” visited the Prague school for a second time and learned how to develop partnerships with state and municipal institutions, design training programs, communicate with clients, and adhere to international standards for suppliers of this type of service. They also purchased three Labradors from the best breeding farm in the region, deciding it would be more cost effective to create a separate breeding program in Bulgaria.

Today the school is a busy place, with two dogs preparing to start training after their host family stay and three dogs preparing to begin their new lives as companions to the blind. Seven blind people are on the waiting list to receive a guide dog. “Eyes on 4 Paws” has ambitious plans to train 10-15 dogs per year over the next 2-3 years.